



PYOTR ILLYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Festival Overture in E-flat major, Op. 49 “The Year 1812”

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (May 7, 1840 to November 6, 1893) was a Russian composer of the Romantic era. His wide-ranging output includes symphonies, operas, ballet, chamber music and songs. From these genres come some of the most popular concert and theatrical music in the repertoire, including the ballets *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*, the *1812 Overture*, his first Piano Concerto and last three symphonies. Born into a middle-class family, Tchaikovsky was educated as a civil servant. Yet against the wishes of his family he enrolled in the Saint Petersburg Conservatory to pursue a musical career. This step also set him apart from many of his contemporaries (such as Balakirev and the Five), who spurned Western-oriented formal training in favour of nationalistic (Russian) inspirations. Tchaikovsky's personal life was often marred by emotional turmoil. He was known for sensitivity even as a child, and he carried this emotional instability well into his adult life. Contributing factors to bouts of depression include the abrupt end of a 13-year relationship with his patron, a wealthy widow named Nadezhda von Meck. Despite his private turmoil his reputation grew and he enjoyed many popular successes. He was honoured by the Tsar, awarded a lifetime pension and lauded in concert halls around the world. His sudden death at age 53 is generally attributed to cholera, but some suspect suicide. Tchaikovsky's music was for a time dismissed by American music critics as being vulgar and lacking in elevated thought. By the end of the 20th century and into the 21st, however, Tchaikovsky's status as a significant composer is regarded as secure.

The Year 1812 (festival overture in E-flat major, Op. 49), popularly known as the *1812 Overture*, is an overture written in 1880 to commemorate Russia's defense of its motherland against Napoleon's invading Grande Armée in 1812. Beginning with the Russian Orthodox *Troparion of the Holy Cross*, the piece moves through a mixture of pastoral and martial themes portraying the increasing distress of the Russian people at the hands of the invading French. This passage includes a Russian folk dance, *At the Gate, at my Gate*. At the turning point of the invasion—the Battle of Borodino—the score calls for five Russian cannon shots confronting a boastfully repetitive fragment of *La Marseillaise*. A descending string passage represents the subsequent retreat of the French forces, followed by victory bells and a triumphant repetition of *God Preserve Thy People* as Moscow burns to deny winter quarters to the French. A musical chase scene appears, out of which emerges the anthem *God Save the Tsar!* thundering with eleven more precisely scored shots. Curiously, neither *La Marseillaise* nor *God Save the Tsar* were national anthems of France or Russia respectively during the French Invasion, although both were in use by the time Tchaikovsky wrote the Overture (and would have been familiar to the listeners).